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ABSTRACT

Ways junior high teachers and parents view moral education are examined. Interviews, conducted with a sample population of teachers and parents in Philadelphia, Memphis, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles, indicate there was virtually unanimous agreement that schools inherently play an important part in moral education since teachers are seen as role models by their students. The groups supported the notion that schools should play a role in moral education, although they denied the increasing necessity for schools to take up the slack for other institutions such as the home and church. Parent groups advocated some type of partnership between home and school as ways to strengthen scholastic moral education, although they were pessimistic that such interaction could be achieved. It was felt that moral education should be a specific part of the curriculum, taught by specially trained teachers, and focus on positive social themes such as the value of consideration for others. (DE)

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# Moral Education - But How Will It Play In Peoria?

A paper presented at the 1976 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association - San Francisco, California

by
Richard B. Vanderveer

## Introduction

Countless thousands of hours have been to date, and continue to be, invested in developing appropriate theories and procedures for educating children in moral and ethical thought and behavior. An issue which has garnered but little interest, however, is what practical use will be made of the outputs of these efforts?

I am reminded of the story of a young Ivy League undergraduate who, resplendent in his three piece Brooks Brothers suit, was attempting to earn tuition money by selling, door to door, a volume entitled "Everything You've Always Wanted to Know About Farming but Were Afraid to Ask." Having one day given his sales spiel to a crusty old New Hampshire farmer, emphasizing the modern technology presented in the book, he was floored by the rejoinder that "Son, I don't farm half as well as I know how already."

In much the same vein, we at the Institute for Survey Research were presented with a project under contract from Research for Better Schools, Inc., in which we were asked to find out to what extent is the American public, unlike the New Hampshire farmer, ready to put theory (i.e., moral education, not farming) into practice.

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## Method

To obtain unbiased indications of themes, affect, terminology and other aspects of the ways in which such relevant persons as parents and teachers

of junior high school students view moral education, a research design consisting of a series of focus groups was decided upon.

More specifically, the populations of interest were defined as (a) opinion-leader parents of junior high school students, and (b) opinion-leader junior high school teachers of social studies and English. For over-whelming practical reasons, no attempt was made to obtain probability samples of these populations. Rather, an availability sample, recruited with the assistance of junior high school principals and pre-stratified so as to provide geographic and socioeconomic heterogeneity, was utilized.

In each of four cities (Philadelphia, Memphis, Minneapolis and Los Angeles) two focus groups were conducted, one with parents, the other with teachers. Each session was moderated by an ISR study director, lasted approximately two hours, and was tape recorded for later content analysis.

In interpretation of the highlights of the data, it should be noted that the study results are necessarily, more qualitative in nature.

Results

During a discussion carried out at the beginning of each session, it became clear that the terms "moral" and "ethical" were generally referred to as "right" and "wrong" behavior in relationship to others. For most discussants, any distinction between these two terms was not a salient issue.

In terms of institutional roles, there was virtually unanimous agreement among parents and teachers alike that schools inherently play an important part in moral education since teachers, whether or not they seek it, are seen as role models by their students. Furthermore, the groups on the whole supported the notion that junior high schools should play a role in moral education, although they decried the increasing necessity for schools to take up the slack for other institutions, such as the home and church, in this regard. All parent groups advocated some type of partnership between home and school as a way to strengthen scholastic moral education programs, although both parents and teachers were pessimistic that such interaction could be achieved.

In general, emphasis was placed on specialized training for both those teachers directly involved in formalized moral education programs, as well as for other teachers who might be expected to, through their words and actions, play ancillary roles. Although this mere global view tended to be popular, it was also felt that moral education should be taught as either a special portion of the curriculum or as a clearly designated part of traditional subjects in order to insure its inclusion in the school program.

In terms of current moral education efforts, it was agreed that most of it occurs on an informal, "vibrations from the teacher" basis. The few formal materials that are available were cited as being beneficial, but limited in scope.

With regard to appropriate content of moral education programs, it was generally felt that moral education should focus on prosocial themes

such as the value of consideration for others and socialization for participation in society.

In addition, there was general agreement that increased self-actualization and self-respect should be outcomes of any moral education program, and unanimous consensus that the content of moral education should be made relevant to student concerns.

While there was a strong emphasis on encouraging students to express their values, forced student self-revelation was generally opposed. Similarly, there was a strong opposition to moral education stipulating generalized, inflexible rules designed to dictate behavior for all persons under all circumstances. Nonetheless, most participants were hopeful that moral education would lead to a generalized improvement in behavior, though some felt that changes in thinking and attitudes were all that could reasonably be expected.

In summary, these and other results of this study seem to indicate that parent and teacher opinion leaders can be expected to support the addition of formalized programs of moral education to the school curriculum.